WOMEN BEHIND THE WHEEL: MID-AGE DRIVERS

This Monograph is composed of excerpts from FORS CR179 Women Behind the Wheel: Driver Behaviour and Road Crash Involvement by Dobson A, Brown WJ and Ball J of the Institute for Gender and Health, University of Newcastle.

The relevance of gender to road safety has long been recognised and it has been the contribution of male drivers to fatal and serious crashes which has, to date, attracted the most attention. Historically, men have tended to be overrepresented in road crash fatalities. In 1996, 1,413 men were killed on Australian roads compared with 564 women.

It is also true that male drivers are more likely to be killed than female drivers for every kilometre travelled. According to FORS Monograph 12, there were 0.74 male driver deaths and 0.47 female driver deaths per 100 million vehicle kilometres travelled.

While male drivers may be more at risk of death on the road, female drivers have a higher risk of sustaining serious injury. As noted in the FORS Monograph, there were 8.74 female driver admissions to hospital as a result of a road crash for every 100 million kilometres travelled compared to 7.24 admissions of male drivers. An increase in risk for female drivers has been noted in the United States of America.

It appears that the issue of female drivers is an emerging concern for road safety. They have a higher level of risk of hospital admission by distance travelled and, due to increased travel, they represent a growing proportion of road casualties. Since 1985, kilometres driven by female drivers have increased by 43.2% compared with an increase in travel of 6.7% by male drivers.

The project

The project described in this report focuses on behaviour of women drivers and is based on two large cohorts of women who are participants in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (WHA). The women are in two age groups (19-24 and 46-51 years at the time of this study) and are from all walks of life, living in all States and Territories of Australia. The overall aim was to explore factors associated with the risk of road crashes for female drivers in Australia. This monograph is concerned with the results for mid-age women.

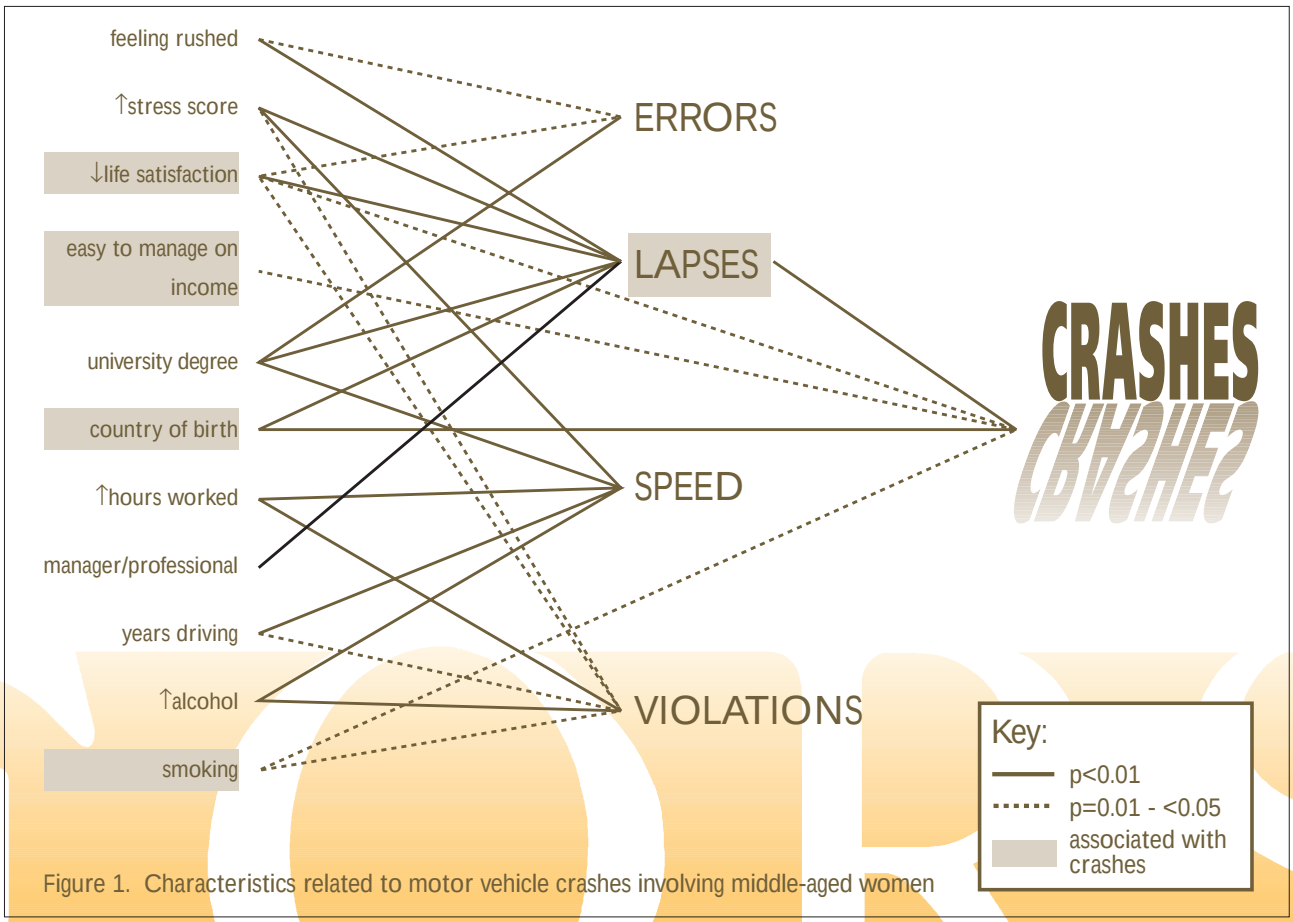

Figure 1. Characteristics related to motor vehicle crashes involving middle-aged women

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

	Young (N=1425) %		Young (N=1425) %
Marital status		**Education (highest qualification)**	
Married, defacto	83.3	School certificate or less	44.2
Separated, divorced, widowed	12.5	Higher school certificate	17.6
Single	3.6	Trade or college certificate	20.8
Missing	0.6	University degree	16.6
Country of birth		Missing	0.9
Australia	77.9	**Employment Status**	
Other English speaking	13.4	Full time	37.7
Non-English speaking	7.9	Part time/casual	32.7
Missing	0.8	No paid work	28.0
		Missing	1.6

A questionnaire was mailed to 2,700 women in April 1997. It included questions about: driving patterns; behaviour in relation to social functions where alcohol is served; items from the Driver Behaviour Questionnaire (DBQ); speed-related items from the Driving Style Questionnaire (DSQ); 'thoroughness' items from the Decision Making Questionnaire (DMQ); and crash history in the last three years. Completed questionnaires were received from 1949 mid-age women (73%), of whom 1834 were drivers. Social and demographic characteristics of the participants were taken from the WHA survey which was conducted one year before the driving survey and are summarised in Table 1.

Results

Scores for errors and violations (from the Driver Behaviour Questionnaire, DBQ) and speed (from the Driving Style Questionnaire, DSQ) were higher in the young women, who also had higher reported rates of crashes in the last three years (1.87 per 100,000 km) than the mid-age women (0.59 per 100,000 km).

Among mid-age women, the rate of crashes reported was much lower than among the young women and scores on the DBQ were also low. Mid-age women with higher lapse scores were also more likely to be involved in crashes. Those who reported high levels of stress, being less satisfied with their lives and those with tertiary education were most likely to have higher lapse scores. Women born in non-English speaking countries were also more likely to be involved in a crash. The results are given in Figure 1.

Overall, the results suggest that crash involvement is related to several factors including feeling stressed and rushed, low life satisfaction, usual alcohol consumption (drink driving itself was not a relevant factor for the young or mid-age group), and being born in a non English speaking country.

The crashes reported in this study were predominantly of low severity and some caution should be applied in extrapolating the results to high severity crashes where additional factors may be involved. Nonetheless the findings could be used to inform the development of strategies for reduction of road crashes among women drivers.

First, the study found that women who were stressed or had low satisfaction with their lives were at increased risk of crash involvement. There is a need for further research to consider the mechanism through which lifestyle characteristics are transferred into increased risk and to identify the type of road safety countermeasures that may be appropriate to this issue.

Second, women born overseas had higher rates of crash involvement, approximately twice that of Australian born women. This finding certainly requires further investigation to identify whether this is due to difficulties in transferring driving skills acquired in another country (ie changing from driving on the right hand side of the road to driving on the left hand side), difficulties in acquiring driving skills in Australia, or to other culturally related factors.